DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 050 084 TE 002 353

AUTHOR Hopper, Robert
TITLE Expanding the Notion of Competence: Some Implications for Elementary Speech Programs.
PUB DATE Dec 70
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association Annual Meeting (56th, New Orleans, December 1970)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language, *Elementary Education, Language Development, *Linguistic Competence, Linguistic Performance, *Psycholinguistics, *Speech Education, Structural Grammar

ABSTRACT

Applications of research in psycholinguistics, particularly Noam Chomsky's research, have suggested some drastic innovations in the practices of both the classroom teacher and the child development researcher. For example, more emphasis is needed upon asking what a speaker knows about the grammar of the language with less concern about how information is learned, and more emphasis should be on what a child knows intuitively about grammatical structures at a given time with less emphasis upon his articulation and vocabulary. In such a process, teachers would use activities to increase children's linguistic competence and performance, and assist them in learning, acquiring, and using their grammar. These practical changes in emphasis would support the concept of linguistic competence as well as encompass the notion of developing the child's competence in the rules of social speech usage. Information from research also suggests that grammar should be taught as a tool for accomplishing relevant goals, thus changing instructional techniques from learning by rote to learning how language functions. This information provides an increased understanding of the child's patterns of development and also emphasizes the rules of usage. It therefore produces a more realistic framework for elementary programs in speech and oral language. (JM)

ED050084

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

EXPANDING THE NOTION OF COMPETENCE: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR ELEMENTARY SPEECH PROGRAMS

Robert Hopper
University of Texas
December, 1970

TE 002 353

This presentation, like Caesar's Gaul, is divided in three parts. First, I will sketch my point of view and its background. Second, I will review two examples of benefits to be derived from this point of view--as persuasive material. Third, I will paint in very broad strokes some implications of this point of view for elementary speech and oral language instruction.

Expanding the notion of competence: the point of view

There has been substantial recent discussion in the speech profession about the implications of recent research in the field of psycholinguistics, for elementary-school instructional programs in speech and oral language. (One of the best reviews of the changes which psycholinguistics has brought to education is Barbara Wood's 1968 Speech Teacher article.)

It should be made clear at the outset that I consider this to be a fruitful and important line of thinking. But taken as the ONLY guide to elementary speech and language instruction, the information provided by developmental psycholinguistics research may not prove sufficient.

To illustrate how this is so, let us briefly review how psycholinguistics has been applied to young children and their education.

Linguist Noam Chomsky is always the starting point in such inquiry. He has argued that it is useful to formulate a grammar of a language in terms of the rules which a speaker would have to know in order to speak his language in grammatical sentences. Chomsky refers to this abstract knowledge of the rules of language underlying speech usage as linguistic competence. This competence is the source of the order underlying the actual act of speech,

which is called performance.

This view is, of course, a substantial shift from the stance of the behaviorist psychologist, who looks only at observable responses. Chomsky is, in effect, talking about the structure of the mind. This change in viewpoint has brought corresponding changes in practices of the child development researcher, and of the classroom teacher.

In research subscribing to these assumptions, there is less concern with how information is learned, and more emphasis upon asking what a speaker knows about the grammar of the language.

In teaching, there has come to be less emphasis upon articulation development and upon how many vocabulary words a child can use. There is increasing emphasis upon asking what a child at a given state of development knows about grammatical structures, and how teachers can assist him in using what he knows to find out (learn/acquire) the rest of the grammar.

These changes have been healthy. Education researchers, for example, now recommend that, in an activity like creative dramatics, teachers pay less attention to gestures and expressional technigues (how to talk good), and greater attention to language structures which children are using.

These examples illustrate some of the uses of the concept of linguistic competence. The developmental psycholinguistic approach accounts for important aspects of what the child is coming to know when he learns how to speak.

But, the perspective of linguistic competence does not account for all that the child learns about speaking in this period of development. Specifically, it does not explain how it is that the child, during the same period of time as he is coming to be able to make grammatical sentences, is learning how to use these sentence structures in appropriate ways within the frameworks of many different kinds of communication situations.

If linguistic competence describes the rules of grammar, what we need to formulate is an aspect of competence which will account for the rules of social speech usage.

The rules of usage--which we use to adjust our speech so that it will be appropriate to the demands of the situations in which we find ourselves--are of tremendous importance to speech behavior. We don't put people in institutions for speaking ungrammatical sentences. If one combines bad grammar with good taste, he can even get on television. But we routinely have our relatives and neighbors committed to various forms of snake pits if they lose the ability to keep straight the rules of usage--governing when you say what to whom and the manner in which it can be said.

The fact that all of us here are surviving in the world indicates that we know the rules of appropriate usage in much the same way that we know the rules of grammar. And even very young children display sophistocated knowledge of these rules. Small children speak differently to their friends than to their parents, and vary their speech still further according to circumstances of time, place, and context.

To state the proposition succinctly: As our knowledge of grammar is called linguistic competence, we could fashion an expanded notion of competence to also include the rules governing how utterances function in situations.

Benefits of expanding the notion of competence

Here are two examples of how taking pragmatic factors into account allows us to see more of what a child knows (his competence).

Psycholinguistic research by McNeill and others has isolated a structure in the speech of young children called the pivot grammar--in which the child speakes two-word sentences like "Allgone truck," Mommy eggnog," and "Red ball."

The usual conclusion has been that the child at this stage possesses a grammar with just two classes of words--these sentences being of one of each.

More recent research has demonstrated that the child knows a good deal more than this. Lois Bloom, for example, has observed the utterance "Mommy sock" being said twice by a child in one day's observations. The pivot-grammar linguist would have treated both utterances the same--but in one case the child was picking up his mother's sock (mommy's sock--possessive), while in the other instance the mother was putting the child's sock on the child (mommy's putting on my sock--descriptive). It is possible to think of several more situations in which this utterance: "Mommy sock," might occur. The child might pick up one of his father's socks in the presence of his mother (mommy, here's a sock), or he might bring the

mother his own sock--either with the purpose in mind of identifying it (Mommy, this is my sock), or of asking the mother to help him put it on (Mommy, put on my sock).

If research takes only grammar into account, all five of these situations would look the same. But in actuality they are five quite different speech events.

Second example. A recent study by the present author examined responses to questions of three- and four-year-old children. Responses were evaluated according to their grammaticality, and also according to whether they performed appropriate response functions to be considered "correct" answers. No differences in grammatical performances were revealed between age groups, but older children did significantly better than younger ones in performing appropriate response functions. If this research had examined only grammar (using the purely-linguistic interpretation of the term competence) important differences between different ages of children would have gone unobserved.

Implications of an expanded notion of competence for instruction

Psycholinguistics research has long known that most of the grammar has already been learned by the child before he enters school. The present research adds to this a hunch that development just prior to entering kindergarten is focusing upon learning to apply linguistic knowledge appropriately to situations.

Educational practices could be most supportive of this aspect of development if less emphasis were placed upon forcing children to speak

sentences in certain grammatical forms (with certain approved structures of grammar properly executed), and greater emphasis were placed upon educating children to use their language to perform certain functions (such as defining or changing certain aspects of their world, referring, abstracting from sets of facts, meta-communicating, making poetry, etc.).

Teachers rarely enjoy teaching grammar, children rarely enjoy studying it, and perhaps children already know most of it before they come to school. So perhaps more emphasis upon functions of speaking would be a better use of educational resources for all concerned.

Also, there is evidence that when children do learn new grammatical structures, they do so because they have become aware of new "meanings" for which they must find means of expression. In this view, the child first learns a new function which language can perform, than he searches what he knows about grammar, and listens to speech around him until he masters an appropriate new grammatical rule. If this picture is accurate, then the best way to teach grammar is to teach function--so the teacher could relieve frustrations over "bad grammar" while teaching something more palatable. As the medievil explorers found, it is sometimes easiest to reach the East by sailing West.

The point is this: just as the old and disastrous practice of teaching grammar to young children has begun to come into the disrepute which it so richly deserves, new advances in linguistics research have radically altered the way scholars look at grammar. This development has unfortunately given some people a fresh hope that if they only teach the NEW GRAMMAR

according to St. Noam, then children WILL at long last learn how to diagram sentences.

The implication of the research cited here is opposite to this trend. It suggests that teaching principles of grammar to young children is inefficient and narrow. Grammar is a matter that children are by nature utterly well-equipped to master, unless well-meaning teachers prevent it. Teachers can best foster such learning by treating the child as though he were a person--and by listening to what he has to say.

A quick aside--I am not saying that the study of grammar is unimportant to education. It is. Every elementary teacher should know the principles of linguistics, so that he can evaluate the grammatical development of his students. But teaching elementary children the principles of grammar which the teacher himself did not learn until college is inappropriate. Linguistic theory is something all teachers should know, but not try to teach.

A second aside is that the teaching environment that is created in the act of trying to cram grammar (even "new" grammar) down the throats of the minds of defenseless children may have consequences that outweigh any benefits which might accrue. This kind of high-power, high-content teaching kills minds--a fact which has been amply documented by Jonathan Kozol in Death at an Early Age, and John Holt in How Children Fail. In case you are not familiar with the general drift of this line of thought, I will quote a passage from Holt's How Children Learn, describing a parent trying to teach his children to swim with no regard to the state of the child's knowledge or interests. There are elements of this father's

wrongheadedness in all of our best efforts as teachers of small children.

> He was a perfect example of the kind of parent . . .who thinks that by superior will and brute force he can make his children learn whatever he wants to teach them. As we arrived at the pool he had his little daughter, about four years old, in his arms, and was moving her about in the water. She did not resist, but she was stiffy motionless, and looked uneasy. After not much more than two or three minutes of this, the father, a young ex-athlete run to fat, decided that she was ready for serious instruction. His plan was to hold her in the water in a swimming position, that is, face down, or belly down, while she paddled and kicked. In its proper time, not a bad idea, but this was not the time, or anywhere near it. The little girl suddenly found herself snatched loose of her grip on her father, and suspended helpless over this new, and still strange and frightening element. She went rigid in his hands, arched her back, as if to lift herself out of the water, and struggled to get loose. No use. Her father held her tightly, and said, in a louder and louder voice, "Kick your feet! Move your hands!" The little girl began to scream, partly in terror and anger, partly in the hope that if she made enough noise her father would have to stop. For a while he countered with threatening shouts of his own: . . .You stop it! Do you hear! There's nothing to be afraid of! Be quiet!" But she held the stronger hand. The pool was surrounded by people, and as her screams got louder and louder, more and more disapproving eyes were turned on him, until he gave up, and furiously lifted her out of the pool. Not long after this he repeated the process with a little boy. Before our short stay at the pool was over, he had reduced all three of his children to tears and terror.

Now, certainly we teachers are rarely this stupid, but we all have found ourselves in the position at one time or another of trying to teach a child something that he is not ready to learn, and doesn't want to learn because he sees no relevance to it. The results are rarely encouraging.

If the teacher who once told her students "dog is a noun," now tells them "dog is a word belonging to Form Class I;" If the

teacher who once drilled her students in diagramming sentences now drills them in branching tree diagrams--then we have made little progress.

What we really need to do is the converse of drill and suffering. We need to let children talk and read about things they care about. That is, learn how language functions by using it as a tool to accomplish goals relevant to their needs.

The teacher's main task in this process should be to respond to function--content--rather than to grammatical form. Or to put it succinctly, to accept all speech that is intelligible, and to speak back to the child in the basis of what is said.

If we do this, grammar will be learned. Not all at once, to be sure. Student-centered methods of teaching take more time than do methods that treat the mind as a sausage-skin, and try to stuff it with as much meat as possible. Maybe our students won't be able to pass a test after six weeks. But that is probably not much of a loss.

This shift in emphasis may be particularly important for those who educate black or Mexican-American children. There are basically two present approaches to elementary speech among such populations. The first (based on old grammar) focuses attention upon getting the child to speak "acceptable standard English." The second (based on "new grammar" and often called something like functional bi-dialectism, or bilingual education) teaches the child grammatical bases of both his original dialect or language and of the educated standard.

The second of these approaches is certainly preferable to the first, but in a larger sense, they may both share the same fundamental error--both approaches emphasize form (grammar) over function (usage).

The evidence presented here argues for the focus on usage. The point of view is that we should design teaching strategies to get children to perform certain kinds of language tasks is some intelligible way.

A corollary to this approach is that so-called disadvantaged children probably differ less from middle-class children less in how much grammar they possess, or in even in what specific grammar--but in patterns of usage. The child who has been leafing through Mother Goose and playing with creative playthings for three years will surely be more award of some of the ways that the school ("learning") situation requires that language be used to perform cognitive tasks than will a child used to environments bearing less resemblance to what goes on in school.

Of course these recommendations are too simplistic. But I would like three points to stand clearly:

1. The child is a dynamic, ever-changing organism. A child of two years is very different from a child of five, who is very different from an adult. We must try to understand what kinds of things a child at a given state of development knows, so that education may use these things as teaching tools to help him learn those things he is most ready to learn.

2. Although the grammar of the language is one of the major things which the child knows, he has learned much of it before school age, and "teaching" him principles of grammar is not only of dubious value, but may have undesirable side-effects.

3. Emphasizing rules of usage instead of rules of grammar may provide a more productive framework for elementary programs in speech and oral language.